

Stop Trying So Hard
Digging Deeper
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For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Ephesians 2:8 ESV

She stood looking out the window, holding her morning cup of coffee in her hand and watching the sun rise slowly over the tree tops. As the light streamed in, it fell on a face that had once been creased with worry and anxiety but was now soft and gentle. She no longer felt the pressure to please others. She had learned to say no to doing just one more thing. She

was free from the need to be perfect. And best of all, she no longer felt guilty for not living up to the unrealistic expectations that had been put on her since she was a child.

Life was good. Not perfect, but good.

He sat that morning at his desk at work, looking forward to the day and a chance to chat with people who had once been co-workers but were now close friends. It made him cringe to think about how it used to be. He had been full of pride back then, always trying to impress others with how smart he was and being critical and judgmental of just about everybody. But now, he had real friends. He had opened up about his struggles, apologized for the way he had treated others and was part of an ever growing circle of people who loved and genuinely cared for each other.

Life was good. Not perfect, but good.

They sat together at dinner that night, talking quietly about their day and the hopes they had for tomorrow and the days after that. It was a peaceful and an intimate conversation where they shared their feelings about God and each other. This was all new and pleasantly surprising to both of them. They had grown distant over the years and there was a tension between them that kept them that way. But both had spent a lot more time recently reading the Bible and opening up to God in prayer. They soon found themselves inhabited by a Holy Spirit and filled with a wisdom that transformed them and their marriage.

And life was good. Not perfect, but good.

It has been said that in the same way water reflects our face, so too our life reflects our heart (Proverbs 27:19). And when we look at our life, we can clearly see whether or not we've given that heart completely to Jesus.

Salvation is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. It defines who we are and who we belong to. And nothing can change that except our own rejection of what we once believed.

But sometimes, when we look closely at our life, we can see things we have brought into our relationship with God that have distanced us from Him and those we love.

There are times when we're distant from God because we just can't believe that we don't have to earn His love (Eph 2:8). That can happen for any number of reasons, but it leaves us frantically trying to seek His approval and burned out by the hopelessness of that effort. It also traps us in approval seeking relationships with others that mirror our unhealthy relationship with God - feeling pressure to do more than we should, constantly striving to be perfect, feeling guilty when we fail, and trying as hard as we can to earn their love.

There is no list of things we have to do to earn God's love, and doing more doesn't bring us any closer to Him. All we need to do is stop trying to get to God through our actions and instead build a relationship with Him. And when we do, the frantic approval seeking behavior ends and we grow closer to God and those we love.

But it can't be just any kind of relationship. It needs to be an intimate one. And for that to happen, we need to purge the pride in our life.

Pride distances us from God. We hide our imperfections, our indiscretions and our disobedience, trying to look good on the outside while covering up the darkness within. We talk constantly about ourselves, what we've accomplished and what we own. Instead of being changed by His Word, we use it to judge others. Instead of showing His love to others, we criticize them. Instead of being humble and vulnerable, we pretend we're better than we are. And with all of that, we end up in a cold and distant relationship with God and those around us.

But there is a way out of that dark place. Freedom from pride and the isolation and loneliness it brings comes from humbly confessing and genuinely grieving our sins and being forgiven (1 John 1:8-9). Confession strips away the veil of secrecy that we hide behind. Grief releases the stress of holding the regrets we have over what we've done or failed to do tightly inside us. And forgiveness liberates us from the darkness of shame and guilt, freeing us to be vulnerable in our relationships with God and each other. That vulnerability is the seed from which intimacy grows and true love begins. Our heart softens and we are free to enjoy the warm, loving relationships that God designed us for (Ezekiel 36:26)

Intimate relationships do take some work. We need to be in constant contact with the Holy Spirit and read God's word every day with our new, softer heart. The Holy Spirit transforms us into the image of Jesus (2 Cor 3:18), renews our mind (Romans 12:2), and produces the fruits of the spirit - including love, joy, peace, patience and many others - which bind us tightly to God and each other (Col. 3:9-10, Gal. 5:22-23). We can also do our part to increase the harvest of fruit by reading God's Word, which nurtures the Spirit, and pruning bad behavior and poor choices from

our lives. Together, walking with the Holy Spirit and being immersed in God's Word fill our life with rich, warm and loving relationships, which is what salvation is really all about.

Salvation is one of those things that Christians sometimes get confused by and even argue about. But at the end of the day, it's really pretty simple. It is all about being in an unbreakable, unconditional, loving relationship with God. His love is freely given to us through our faith in Jesus Christ and cannot be earned. It liberates us from the pride that separates us from Him and those we love. And it comes with forgiveness, which makes intimacy and true love possible.

What else do you need to know?

Now, go live like you're saved. Because if you've given your heart to Jesus and are committed to following his ways, you are.

Reflect

There is no list of things we have to do to earn God's love, and doing more doesn't bring us any closer to Him. All we need to do is stop trying to get to God through our actions and instead build a relationship with Him.

Pray

Heavenly Father, I am worn out from the pressure of trying to earn your love and the approval of others. My pride has distanced me from you and

those around me. And my busyness keeps me from opening up to your Holy Spirit and reading your Word.

Release me from my constant striving to measure up and open my eyes to the gift of life and love that is freely available to me through your son Jesus. Replace my spirit of pride with a spirit of humility. And fill my heart with your Holy Spirit and my mind with your Word so that I may know true intimacy with you and those I love.

Amen

Discuss

Questions for Understanding

What motivates people to try and earn God's love? Have you ever fallen into that trap?

Our relationship with people often reflects our relationship with God. Do you spend a lot of time seeking other people's approval? Are you crushed, or do you feel ignored or offended, when you don't get it? Is approval seeking or trying to earn recognition wearing you out? Are you someone who does too much for others and has a hard time focusing on self care?

Thought Provoking Question

Prideful people hurt others and are hard to be around to be sure. But it

helps to remember that their pride comes from their own pain and suffering.

What kinds of life experiences can make a person prideful?

How can you lovingly help someone overcome their pride?

Questions for Sharing

People are naturally drawn to those who are humble, Jesus being the best example.

What makes humility so attractive?

Has there ever been a moment in your life when you realized how important humility is?